



Peer Network Pilot

March 2012

Introduction

BrightStars is Rhode Island's Child Care Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). Quality Rating and Improvement Systems are a proven strategy to support and improve quality care and developmental outcomes for children. Currently, more than 115 center-based child care programs, preschools, school-age programs, and family child care providers participate in BrightStars. BrightStars is also the Child Care Resource and Referral Center for the state. The Center serves as an education and resource portal, offering professional development for child care providers and information and child care referrals for parents and families. BrightStars also works to coordinate existing child care resources, professional development, training, and technical assistance services.

Data collected from statewide research studies^{1,2,3} and from participating BrightStars programs indicates a consistent need for high-quality, ongoing professional development for child care professionals. Research indicates that increased professional development correlates with higher quality care for children. This correlation occurs most readily when professional development is effective and meaningful to providers. Knowledge acquisition alone does not have a significant impact on care without the follow-up that is essential to translate knowledge into practice. In order for professional development to be effective, research suggests that it include the following components: clear content based on needs assessment, collaborative relationships, knowledge application, reflection and analysis, and evaluation.⁴

The facilitated Peer Network model has been proven to be an effective professional development experience for participants. Peer networks accomplish change in practice by offering support, creating collegial relationships, facilitating common understanding of new knowledge, and encouraging enhanced practice.⁵

BrightStars' plan to create facilitated peer networks addressed an established need and supported the program's mission to recognize and support quality in child care and early learning programs. Peer networks create a beneficial professional development opportunity for both facilitators and participants.

¹ Maxwell, K. L., & Kraus, S. (2010). Rhode Island's 2009 child care center and preschool quality study. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute.

² Maxwell, K. L., & Kraus, S. (2010). Rhode Island's 2010 family child care quality study. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute.

³ Maxwell, K. L., Kraus, S., & Hume, K. (2011). Rhode Island's 2010 school-age child care quality study. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute.

⁴ Trivette, C.M., Dunst, C.J., Hamby D.W. & O'Herin, C.E. (2009). Characteristics and consequences of adult learning methods and strategies. (Winterberry Research Synthesis, Vol. 2, No.2). Asheville, NC: Winterberry Press.

⁵ Bromer, J. (2009). Staffed support networks and quality in family child care: Findings from the family child care network impact study. Chicago: Herr Research Center.

In March of 2011, BrightStars solicited proposals for the development of facilitated Peer Networks aimed at providing support and professional development for providing quality care and education. Funded Peer Networks were expected to be dedicated to rigorous quality improvement and practice change that is concrete, measurable, and validated by current research. Peer Networks were comprised of ten to twelve child care providers, administrators, family child care providers and/or school-age care professionals. Each of the Peer Networks:

- met at least six times during the project period,
- participants received at least two supportive visits from facilitators, and
- participants had opportunities to observe and visit programs of other participants.

Facilitators also supported participants in developing individual goals to guide their learning experience, encourage accountability for individual learning, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the experience.

Project Goals

Participants in the peer networks will:

- Enhance their knowledge about best practice in early childhood, quality standards and indicators, and current research in the field.
 - Gain support and strength in the application of increased knowledge into higher quality care-giving practices.
 - Increase access to resources and support around quality improvement.
 - Gain a network of fellow child care providers for future support and problem-solving.
-

Peer Network Information

Five networks, representing various professionals throughout the state, were funded through this opportunity.

Peer Network Areas of Focus:

- Support administrators working in large child care programs through the unique challenges that large programs face. A specific goal emerged after convening the peer network: information and support around reflective supervision and implementing it within individual programs.
- Support administrators and teachers through the unique challenges of working within child care programs located in urban and/or low income communities. Specific focus on:

family involvement and engagement, challenging behavior, administrative policies, staff supervision, and finding high quality professional development opportunities.

- Support Spanish-speaking family child care providers to develop their professionalism and improve their practice through meaningful interactions and support from the Peer Network group.
- Create a sustainable peer support network that provides professional development to the area’s child care programs - focused direction, sustaining research-based practices and networking contact in the education community.
- Facilitate the establishment of purposeful relationships between early care providers working in different locations/settings. Foster providers’ capacity to collaborate and support one another in exploring transformation of current and incorporation of newly learned strategies for teaching and learning with young children. Engage in work that increases the visibility of children as learners and citizens in the community.

All groups reviewed and refined their focus/topic area throughout the project. The majority of groups agreed that choosing an area of focus was important to group productivity and gave the group a mutual goal.

Facilitator Information:

Nine project facilitators led the five Peer Networks. Most networks included a facilitation team of two people, with one network using consultants in lieu of a co-facilitator. All facilitators had previous experience with supervision and extensive experience in early care and education, and the majority had experience leading groups. All facilitators attended a two part pre-service training offered by BrightStars.

Professional role of facilitators

Child Care Director: 22%	Independent Consultant: 22%
Family Child Care Provider: 11%	Lead Teacher: 11%
Higher Education: 11%	Mental Health Consultant/Supervisor: 22%

Educational background of facilitators

Associate’s Degree: 11%	Graduate Degree: 56%
Bachelor’s Degree: 33%	

Participant Information:

Sixty-two professionals participated in the Peer Network pilot project.

Professional role of participants

Administrator: 44%	Lead Teacher/Administrator: 2%
Family Child Care Provider: 16%	Teacher Assistant: 6%
Lead Teacher: 32%	

Work setting

Child Care Center: 71%	Preschool: 13%
Family Child Care Home: 16%	

Age group cared for

Infant/Toddler: 2%	Preschool: 34%
Infant/Toddler/Preschool: 10%	Preschool/School-Age: 2%
Infant/Preschool: 3%	School-Age: 2%
Toddlers: 3%	
Toddler/Preschool: 3%	All Age Groups: 35%
Toddler/Preschool/School-Age: 6%	

Educational background

High School/GED: 11%	Associate's Degree: 13%
CDA: 5%	Bachelor's Degree: 46%
CDA and college credit: 3%	Graduate Degree: 13%
Some college credit: 3%	Unknown: 6%

- Percent of participants that did not complete the project due to illness, job loss, etc.: 23%
- Percent of participants that began participation in the project after initial start date: 15%

Work completed:

Peer Network	# meetings of Peer Network	# supportive visits (facilitator to participant)	# reciprocal visits (participant to participant)
A	7	16	3
B	6	29	15
C	6	20	18
D	7	17	13
E	6	21	13

Evaluation

A multi-faceted evaluation of the Peer Network pilot was conducted.

At the conclusion of the project, participants who completed the process were asked to report whether or not they attained the individual goals developed at the beginning of the project. Ninety-two percent of participants reported meeting one or more individual goals; twenty-three percent reported meeting all established goals.

Participants were required to complete an individual product or a group product that reflected individual input that summarized the content and value of what was learned through this professional development experience. Examples of end products included: presentation at a state conference, completing a reflective summary about the professional impact of participating in the peer network, submitting a description of new supervision practices within a participating program, appearing in a publication that focused on documenting children's work, a video project focusing on reflection and about the power of documentation as a mechanism for supporting children's growth. Seventy-nine percent of participants completed an end product.

Participants and facilitators also completed pre and post project surveys that assessed their perception of individual knowledge of: research and quality indicators, access to resources, and connectedness to professionals and resources in the field. Surveys indicated that:

- 52% of participants perceived an increase in access to resources and information regarding child care and education to support their work.
- 50% of participants perceived an increase in their ability to identify quality care indicators and apply them to their practice.
- 40% of participants felt more connected to and supported by other professionals.
- 44% of facilitators perceived an increase in access to resources and information regarding child care and education to support their work.
- 44% of facilitators perceived an increase in knowledge about and ability to provide effective professional development.
- 44% of facilitators reported an increase in their ability to lead groups.

Survey data was self-reported by participants and facilitators. It is possible that the data reflects an evolution of self-awareness that occurred throughout and as a result of the project, and that individual's over-rated their knowledge and skills at the beginning of the project. As one facilitator commented, "at the beginning of the project, participants didn't know what they didn't know".

Peer Network participants were encourage and supported through the network process to participate in the BrightStars Quality Rating and Improvement System.

- Percent of participants working in BrightStars programs at project start: 48%
 - Percent of participants working in BrightStars programs at project end: 54%
-

Summary of Feedback

Selected Comments from Facilitators:

- “It forced me to think about how to make real change, particularly given the research about ‘training’ and how I can impact a group of highly motivated, educated and competent professionals.”
- “This opportunity allowed me to build on the past limited experience and intentionally cultivate my own sensitivity to participants’ strengths and needs through observations of individuals and the group in meetings, listening and making contingent responses during supportive visits, and collaborating with other members of our network’s facilitation team to plan and implement appropriate, relevant use of our group meetings time.”
- “It was fantastic to experience the extent to which participants felt that the peer network was both so enjoyable and beneficial that participants’ attendance was consistent. People attended after work hours meetings with very little external incentive to do so.”
- “By working with participants, I was able to do a lot of useful research on topics that were of interest to many. By visiting the other centers so frequently, I was able to better understand the circumstances they work in and help develop ways to address issues that were important to them. I also learned a great deal in many areas of best practice in early education. Many of the things I learned I was able to use at my own center with my staff.”
- “I guess what surprises me was to realize that [family child care providers] begin to see each other as knowledgeable and experienced professionals who can learn from each other.”

Selected Comments from Participants:

- “This has been the most directly useful professional development I have undertaken.”
- “The experience has given me a chance to step back and look and decide how I could improve and promote quality child care”.

- “I have advanced in the BrightStars process and hope it will be submitted soon. We are trying to complete the process. We are much closer than when we started.”
 - “When I first started this project, I thought I would be in something insignificant. But going to the meetings (workshops) I started realizing how important it was to share my doubts, my worries and my ideas, to count on a group of professional people that can help with providing positive ideas.”
 - “Learning from each other is just as good if not better than formal education.”
 - “This group of childcare providers has melded into a supportive network of colleagues whom I can turn to in need of support, ideas, strategies...I belong to other groups, but this group is more focused on the day to day, personnel, family issues that we all deal with...I now have a peer to turn to discuss concerns or issues. This group has become the support system that I was missing.”
 - “Meeting with a group of my peers monthly has increased my motivation to make the changes I have wanted to make and I truly feel more connected and better able to assist my staff in their personal and professional growth as teachers.”
 - “The families and children at our center ultimately benefit from our improved supervision practices with teachers as our teachers increase their competence and confidence in their classrooms.”
-

Conclusions & Next Steps

Much interest has been generated by the BrightStars Peer Network pilot. The project will continue in 2012, and will be expanded in future years. The state’s recently awarded Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant charges BrightStars with expanding “current peer support networks to include cross-sector supports for educators at all levels”.

In June 2012, BrightStars will present the process and results of the Peer Network pilot at the National Association for the Education of Young Children Professional Development Institute. The title of the presentation is: “The BrightStars Peer Network Pilot: Using professional development research to create an alternative and collaborative form of professional development.”

One of the Peer Networks is the subject of a chapter in *Our Inquiry, Our Practice: Undertaking, Supporting, and Learning from Early Childhood Teachers Research(ers)*. The book explores “what teacher research in the early childhood setting looks like, why it is important to the field of early childhood education, and how teacher educators can support it.” The chapter details

the powerful six-month Peer Network professional development initiative that supported early care providers in investigating best practices for supporting children’s learning and making that learning visible to the community.

Based on initial evaluation of the pilot and feedback received from both participants and facilitators, the BrightStars Peer Network project has been shown to be a promising professional development model. BrightStars will continue to collect data on and evaluate the current and future iterations of the project.

Contact Information

For more information, contact:

Lisa Hildebrand, Assistant Director, Program & Professional Development
Sheila Grant Orphanides, Quality Improvement Specialist

Rhode Island AEYC & BrightStars
655 Main Street, Suite 201
East Greenwich, RI 02818
(401) 398-7605

www.BrightStars.org

Acknowledgements

BrightStars thanks all the participants and facilitators who participated in the 2011 Peer Network pilot.

We also thank the following individuals and agencies who provided support and training to the networks: Chris Amirault, Ph.D., President, Rhode Island AEYC; Sue Washburn, Educational Development Center; and CHILD, Inc.

BrightStars thanks these organizations for its support of BrightStars and this project:

